To the memory of an angel . . . *

G. Cornaglia

Department of Pathology, University of Verona, Italy

The Institute of Hygiene and later also the Institute of Microbiology of the University of Cagliari lies half way up a steep street called Via Porcell, which climbs the hill to the old fortress simply known as the 'Castle'. For many Sardinians, Cagliari *is* the Castle and the dialect word 'Casteddu' means their capital city.

On 10 June 1940 a little boy struggled up Via Porcell with his elder sister tugging at his sleeve. The air raid sirens reminded even the most unwitting that Cagliari, Sardinia and Italy from that day on were at war, and that grim background music was to mark their lives for four interminable years. Meanwhile, the little boy trudged up Via Porcell on his way home with his feet swollen and pinched in his new shoes bought for an important event, his first communion.

At home, on the ramparts of Santa Croce, there were three other brothers awaiting him. A fourth, Tonio, had died a few years earlier at the age of seven, the victim of a brief, unforgiving attack of *Eberthella* meningitis (*Eberthella* in those days was the common term for *Salmonella*). Their mother, too, had passed away. After Tonio's death, she spent much of her time at the cemetery sitting at his graveside on a chair she brought with her from home or which was lent to her by a kind-hearted cemetery keeper. Nature, too, had pity on her: within only a few months another bacterium, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, had plunged the little house on the ramparts of Santa Croce once more into mourning.

I was born on 10 June 1958, exactly 18 years to that very day, and therefore I have no direct recollection of the war years, but the story of that boy in his new shoes and the name of Via Porcell were to accompany me throughout my childhood in Sardinia, for that boy was none other than my father.

Another figure that could be seen going up that same street every day during my father's childhood was a short, taciturn man, invariably wearing a black suit, even at the height of the torrid Cagliari summer. Via Porcell, in fact, was the street that linked the Institute of Hygiene which he directed with the other office he had been called upon to occupy in the Spanish Rooms of the Rectorate of the University. Who knows how often he may have turned, on his way up the hill, to admire the magnificent view of the Gulf of Cagliari, of the sea which, not long afterwards, was to yield his most important discovery? I do not know whether the paths of the man in the black suit and the boy in the tight shoes ever crossed that day, but I like to think they did. What is sure is that my father often talked to me about those years and about the little, taciturn man always dressed in black, who, perhaps for that reason, was widely suspected of bringing bad luck.

When, many years later, I went to work in Cagliari as a microbiologist, I often joked about this with Giuseppe Satta, Brotzu's third successor after Antonio Spanedda and Bernardo Loddo, and together we reflected upon the strange destiny of Giuseppe Brotzu, a man remembered in the city more for his not exactly flattering reputation as a 'bird of ill omen' than for his discovery of the cephalosporins. We would talk about this when at the end of the day – or to be more precise in the early hours of the morning, since it was usually well past midnight – we settled down to a glass or two of brandy in that poky little attic room that Giuseppe rather pompously called 'my room', and which perhaps was the same room where years earlier Brotzu and Spanedda watched the *Cephalosporium acremonium* moulds grow. 'What a weird destiny the man had . . .', he would say, little knowing what fate had in store for him, unhappily, all too soon.

Ten years later, living and working far from Sardinia and with Giuseppe Satta no longer there to guide me, I hesitated for some time before finally deciding to organise the Cephalosporin Jubilee, mainly on account of the disproportion between the greatness of the event we were celebrating and my own position and age. I still feel very distinctly that I acted only as a catalyst for something which, in any event, *had* to happen. Everything contributed to my decision: the stories of my childhood, my long talks with Giuseppe Satta, my attachment to my native Sardinia. But perhaps the main factor was the memory of little Tonio, of his faded photograph among my father's mementoes and the awareness of how many stories like his were to have a different and a better outcome as a result of the advances in antibiotic research. Above all, there was the satisfaction to be had from reminding everyone what Giuseppe Brotzu – the 'bird of ill omen' – and his research have meant for so many people in terms of fortune, health and life.

The Cephalosporin Jubilee and these Proceedings are dedicated to little Tonio Cornaglia and to all those who lived too soon to benefit from this good fortune, in the hope that we will manage not to waste this great gift, but to go on deserving it for many years to come.

*Violin concerto by Alban Berg, inspired by the death from poliomyelitis of Alma Mahler's daughter.

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